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The language of leadership in a deadly pandemic

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In early May 2020, when approximately 265,000 deaths had been attributed to the COVID-19 virus across the world, many countries were in various stages of lockdown, unemployment was increasing rapidly and most employees who had jobs were working remotely. Faced with the initial signs of an emerging health and economic catastrophe, what language was used by prominent leaders as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed?

In the early months of the pandemic, some leaders used their communications with stakeholders to exercise accountability, effect transparency and develop a “tone at the top” intended to promote trust. Some well-known corporate CEOs used language effectively, speaking and writing with candour, compassion and positivity to encourage followers to have confidence in their actions in a time of crisis. But this pandemic, with its “known unknowns” and its “unknown unknowns” made uniformed positivity – often in defiance of expert medical knowledge – a potentially compromising approach. As the virulence of the virus became apparent and the death toll grew, uniform optimism was clearly inappropriate.

COVID-19 is not “just another flu”

We have witnessed the capacity of the COVID-19 pandemic to “eviscerate a business, its workforce and its profitability within a single month.”¹ The pandemic’s impact has been profound. It has extended beyond economic consequences for individual businesses and industries, posing a calamitous threat to those infected and to the global supply chain and social stability worldwide.

The politics of pandemic speech

Before the actual dangers of the virus were fully apparent, U.S. President Donald Trump used daily press briefings to make unrelentingly positive claims downplaying the risk of an epidemic and asserting the virus did not pose a significant risk to the nation. His excessively optimistic pronouncements, since derided widely, were intended to convey the message “I know what we can expect, and I’m in control.” Instead of addressing the unknowns or exhibiting any doubt by preparing for a worst-case scenario, President Trump chose to act as Optimist-in-Chief, ostensibly to calm an anxious public. Critics have suggested his “happy talk” was actually intended to reassure the stock market and to maintain its earlier gains. Trump’s “boosterism” in “talking up” the well-being of the economy and financial markets was a critical element of his re-election strategy.

The spoken words of political leaders of some other nations also had a “cheer leader” quality. They seem to have been intent on deliberately painting a rosy picture, often contrary to expert medical research and dire statistical evidence. In Brazil, for example, President Jair Bolsonaro adamantly denied the reality of bad news, raised expectations falsely, and as a consequence, the viral contagion spread out of control.

When leaders don’t know what they don’t know

When a crisis arises, especially a novel one, leaders should use language that reflects humility, authenticity, honesty and transparency. They should admit they do not possess all the answers to the problem at hand and refrain from promoting unproven remedies that exploit public uncertainty.²

Nonetheless, President Trump has regularly made confident statements touting untested drugs and proposing bizarre therapies for the virus. For example, he suggested the virus might be treated by injections of disinfectant:

“And then I see the disinfectant where it knocks it [the virus] out in a minute. One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning? ... I’m not a doctor. But, I’m, like, a person that has a good you-know-what.”³

President Trump has not been alone in offering wacky advice or making baseless predictions. Other national political leaders have used language that sets an unrealistic tone of positivity for their citizens. On March 3, 2020 – three weeks before his COVID-19 diagnosis and hospitalization– UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

“I was at a hospital the other night where I think there were actually a few coronavirus patients and I shook hands with everybody, you’ll be pleased to know, and I continue to shake hands.”⁴

The risks of pretending to be knowledgeable

Corporate CEOs have made their share of inappropriate “unknowing” declarations too. One of Australia’s richest executives, Gina Rinehart, Executive Chairman of Hancock Prospecting, in a letter to staff in May 2020, suggested a remedy involving “intravenous injections of vitamin C and regular consumption of ginger, turmeric and lemon water.”⁵ On March 19, 2020 Tesla CEO, Elon Musk, predicted that there would be “close to zero new cases in the U.S. by the end of April.”⁶ The one day toll for the U.S. on April 30 was 2,124 reported deaths.

What are the lessons for CEOs?

The best communications policy for a CEO is to acknowledge bad news, plainly, humbly and calmly. In doing so, they should present a narrative that includes some aspects of a strategy to survive an existential crisis. In terms of a widely used metaphor of the pandemic, they should also suggest ways of surviving the crisis, TO GET TO THE OTHER SIDE.

Emotion and action support credibility

There have been laudable examples of effective CEO communication during the pandemic. The CEO of Marriott International, Arne Sorensen, was praised widely for the honesty, clarity and transparency of his emotional six-minute video address on March 20, 2020.⁷ He was visibly upset when announcing staff lay-offs and warning that the pandemic’s economic effects would be greater than 9/11 and the 2007-2009 global financial crises combined. Sorensen called for Marriott to apply strong financial controls. He enhanced his credibility by announcing that he and other executives would take a 50 percent salary cut. His address has been described as inspirational and “a powerful lesson in leading during a crisis.”⁸

Ramp up communication in a crisis

A distinctive feature of CEOs' oral and written communication during the pandemic has been the change in the mode of delivery. As employees worked from home when businesses locked down in March and April 2020, CEOs resorted more to online modes of spoken communication, such as orchestrated online meetings using communications software technologies such as *Zoom* and *Skype*. Many CEOs tried to maintain morale through informal online meetings with employees at which they shared information and experiences: for example, through virtual "happy hours," daily "town hall" meetings and weekly all-company videoconferences. CEOs "ramp[ed] up communication with employees to address confusion, anxiety and isolation among the rank and file."⁹

Consider the message that can be inferred from your words

In an attempt to choose the right words to allay employee concerns leaders have often chosen to call the crisis "unprecedented." For example, BlackRock Chairman, Larry Fink, in his Letter to Shareholders on March 29, 2020 claimed the "coronavirus ... [was] ... an unprecedented medical, economic and human challenge." But history offers a number of precedents that could offer valuable lessons, such as the "economic challenges" posed by the Great Depression of 1929 to 1933.¹⁰

Use of the term "unprecedented" also reflects a poor understanding of the successful and unsuccessful strategies for containing the H1N1 influenza virus pandemic—commonly (known as the Spanish Flu) of 1918-1919. In that pandemic, "about 500 million people or one-third of the world's population became infected" and at least 50 million [died] worldwide, including about 675,000 in the United States.¹¹ A key lesson from that epidemic: cities that shut down promptly suffered fewer fatalities than cities that didn't.

Cynical observers have suggested that the adjectives "unprecedented" and "extraordinary" have been used as part of a broader rhetorical agenda of CEOs to condition readers to the impending release of poor operating and financial results. Or perhaps they are intended to help deflect attention from the unpreparedness of companies to assess risk and plan for a "Black Swan" event like the pandemic. Or in

other cases they may simply be an awkward attempt to describe the management of discontinuity.

For example, JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon uses “extraordinary” 24 times in his 2019 letter to shareholders dated April 6, 2020. Among the matters he describes as extraordinary are “things,” “lengths” [to which the company has gone to help customers], “efforts” [to lift up our communities], “times,” “crisis,” “extension of new credit” and “team.” “Unprecedented” is used four times: to describe the “environment,” “challenges,” “times” and “situation.”

In their choice of words, CEOs would be well advised to follow the advice of the *New York Times* stylebook: “Use the term [unprecedented] rarely, and only after verifying the history. Then carefully specify the aspect that qualifies.”¹²

Don’t use intemperate language in a crisis

The language of leadership during a pandemic should be calm and selfless. Yet, Tesla CEO Elon Musk, in a series of tweets in March and April 2020, and in the company’s first quarter 2020 earnings call on April 29, 2020, used extreme, and offensive language to express his strong disdain for government stay-at-home orders. Musk delivered this hot-headed rant because he was frustrated at being prevented from resuming production at his Northern California manufacturing plant. He set an egregious example for the broader community by claiming these state health orders were “fascist” and tantamount to “forcible imprisonment.” He called for people to be given back “their Goddamn freedom” and completed his tirade with the offensive expression “What the f***.” Such language is insensitive in the stressful environment of a pandemic when workers have good reason to be especially worried about the lives of their young and old family members.¹³

The language of a prepared CEO

Warren Buffett, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, has been an exception to what appears to be a broader lack of preparedness of CEOs, and their companies, to cope with disaster or catastrophe. In his 2019 letter to shareholders -- signed and dated February 22, 2020, before the pandemic’s full implications were apparent -- Buffett was channelling his “Oracle of Omaha” persona:

“A major catastrophe that will dwarf hurricanes Katrina and Michael will occur – perhaps tomorrow, perhaps many decades from now. “The Big One” may come from a traditional source ... or it may be a total surprise involving say, a cyber attack having disastrous consequences beyond anything insurers now contemplate.”

Buffet’s forewarning is especially noteworthy because it implies that corporations would be delinquent if they didn’t prepare for Black Swan events, such as a virulent pandemic sweeping through a globally connected world. Recent medical history confirms that the world is indeed at risk, having confronted HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, Avian Flu in 1997, Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, N1H1 (swine flu) in 2009, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012 and Ebola in 2013.

How JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon frames the dialog

Dimon’s letter to shareholders, published in early April 2020, has been praised for dispensing with the usual template for a CEO letter in order “to address the coronavirus crisis.”¹⁴

As the pandemic was spreading, Dimon’s letter depicted COVID-19 as the cause of “hardships,” “fears,” “turmoil” and of “creating further inequities in society.”¹⁵ Dimon’s “pandemic-speak” directs blame at COVID-19 for the misfortunes stakeholders are experiencing. However, he refrains from acknowledging that corporate risk management, vulnerable business models and excessive debt have contributed to the economic fallout from the pandemic. Instead, he finds other causes to blame, for example, public policy.

Dimon’s framing in Section 7 of his letter, “*We need to come together: My fervent hope for America,*” is instructive. In the middle of this section, Dimon is highly critical of America’s failure to adequately address a range of social ills: the quality of inner-city schooling, an increasingly costly healthcare system, the scourge of obesity, ineffective infrastructure planning, misplaced immigration policies and poorly designed social safety nets. By offering these criticisms, Dimon portrays himself and his company as

socially progressive and well aware of systemic factors that have worsened the effects of the epidemic.

But elsewhere his text revels in an America that is “great” and blessed with “extraordinary [and unequalled] gifts” of freedoms bequeathed by the “Founding Fathers.” His text adopts the language of a sugar-coated eulogy of America and critics seem entitled to characterize it as a “parody of the worst excesses of an advertising copywriter.”¹⁶

Dimon adopts the high moral ground by calling for “non-partisan solutions” and urges readers not to lay blame by “finger pointing.” He calls for “America to roll up its sleeves,” to “strengthen America’s role on in the world,” and to preserve “the freedoms ascribed by our Founding Fathers.” Piling on the patriotic references, he even invokes John F. Kennedy: “Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.” And he draws a link between “happiness, our freedoms, and free enterprise.” Dimon caps his panegyric by declaring his “deep and abiding faith in the United States of America and its extraordinary resiliency and capabilities.”¹⁷

Dimon’s recipe for rallying his stakeholders in the midst of a pandemic seems to be this: confer agency on the disease, cite the need for progressive solutions and add a heavy dose of American patriotism. Some observers have suggested that Dimon’s message was intended to enhance his credibility as a corporate leader who is capable of engaging with the unsolved dilemmas of America’s economic and social policies.¹⁸ His stakeholders will be the judges of the effectiveness of his language choices during a pandemic.

Effective pandemic-speak: be less self-serving and more strategic

We should be evermore conscious that the language of leaders, particularly CEOs, is “not merely words that evaporate into thin air ... [but that we should] monitor the language used by CEOs and hold them accountable for [it].”¹⁹ For their part, CEOs should seek to be less self-serving and presumptive in their crisis communications and place greater stock in the wisdom offered by studies of how best to exercise strategic communication choices in a crisis.²⁰ The lessons that can be drawn from examples of the notable communication miscues some leaders have made in the crisis are simple:

forsake false optimism, avoid confected boosterism, honestly acknowledge “known unknowns” and offer realistic plans for safely moving ahead.

Notes

¹ B. Salt. “Galvanised for post-virus action.” *The Australian* (2020, April 2): 20.

² D. Tourish. “Introduction to the special issue: Why the coronavirus crisis is also a crisis of leadership.” *Leadership* (2020): 261-272.

³ “Coronavirus: Outcry after Trump suggests injecting disinfectant as treatment.” Retrieved on April 24, 2020 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/amp/world-us-canada-52407177>

⁴ C. Duncan. “Coronavirus: How Boris Johnson ignored health advice at his peril before Covid-19 diagnosis.” *The Independent* (n.d.). Retrieved on April 24, 2020 from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/coronavirus-boris-johnson-positive-test-health-advice-shaking-hands-hospital-hancock-a9430231.html>

⁵ P. Garvey. “Doctor wary of Rinehart remedy.” *The Australian* (2020, May 5): 5.

⁶ E. Lopatto. “Was Elon’s Tesla Twitter meltdown illegal? An investigation.” *This Week in Elon*. (2020, May 1). Retrieved May 7, 2020 from <https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/1/21244747/elon-musk-tesla-tweets-shares-sec-settlement-stock>

⁷ The video is accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SprFgoU6aO0>

⁸ J. Aten. “Marriott’s CEO shared a video with his team and it’s a powerful lesson in leading during a crisis.” *Inc.* (2020). Retrieved April 27, 2020 from <https://www.inc.com/jason-aten/marriotts-ceo-shared-a-video-with-his-team-its-a-powerful-lesson-in-leading-during-a-crisis.html>

⁹ C. Cutter and J. Maloney. “How CEOs step up when they can’t step out.” *The Australian* (2020, Mar 24): 20.

¹⁰ In the Great Depression, “industrial production in the United States declined 47 percent and real gross domestic product fell 30 percent. The wholesale price index declined 33 percent ... and the unemployment rate exceeded 20 percent at its highest point...” Encyclopaedia Britannica online. Retrieved on April 24, 2020 from <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Depression#ref234439>

¹¹ Retrieved on April 23, 2020 from <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>

¹² P.B. Corbett. “An unprecedented tsunami of hyperbole.” *New York Times Blog* (2015, April 21).

¹³ Lopatto, op. cit, 2020.

¹⁴ D. Benoit. “JPMorgan’s Dimon: A bad recession on cards.” *The Australian* (2020, April 8): 20.

¹⁵ P.14 of Dimon’s letter

¹⁶ J. Amernic and R. Craig. “‘9/11’ in the Service of Corporate Rhetoric: Southwest Airlines’ 2001 Letter to Shareholders.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 28 (2004): 330.

¹⁷ All quotes in this paragraph are from p. 19 of Dimon’s letter.

¹⁸ A striking irony is that if America was as great as Dimon contends, then the social policy ills he mentions would not exist or would not be as critical.

¹⁹ Amernic and Craig, op. cit., p. 334.

²⁰ See, for example, H. F. Garcia. “Strategic choices for managing potential crises.” *Strategy & Leadership* (2017): 3.